

He needed to escape. He looked around for the exits. Windows, doors, anything. But Michael was standing inside a windowless room, and she stood between him and the door. *What do I do?* He wondered.

“We’re on your side,” she stated, “you have nothing to worry about. You’re safe.”

Safe.

Safe.

The word pounded around his head. He closed his eyes and spun off into a blur of crimson red, deep black, and ghastly white. When he opened them again, she was on the floor. Her face was blue. Her eyes were glazed over. She was dead.

I didn’t mean to kill her. He thought.

He spotted blankets in the corner. He turned around and grabbed one to wrap her body in. When he turned back, she was standing before him, inches from his face, breathing heavily. Her eyes were red. Her face looked murderous.

Air. He needed air. He gasped and sputtered, but couldn’t satisfy his lungs. Beads of sweat dripped down his face. He felt faint and nauseous. He was in his bed, the witness to another nightmare.

Slowly, he regained control over himself. His breathing and pulse slowed. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and carefully lifted himself from the bed. He peeled the soaking sheets off, threw them in the washer, and started coffee in the kitchen.

Smiling up at him, as he sat down to the table, was Ashley. Her hair was a chestnut brown. It flowed in waves and illuminated her olive-colored skin. Her

eyes were sparkling emerald-green, with the warmth of a sunflower. And her smile was enough to brighten anyone's day.

*I am so lucky, thought Michael, to have such a beautiful wife.
That's why she mustn't know.*

He grabbed his coffee and slowly sipped it as his mind drifted back to his dream. Nearly every night for the past few months, Michael experienced horrifying nightmares. Each dream became more and more real. His last dream seemed the most vivid. Something felt vaguely familiar. He tried to pull the memory back, but couldn't.

Finally, he gave up and went off to work.

At precisely 5:00pm, Michael put on his coat and left his office building. He walked briskly to his car. He paused for a moment before opening the car door. *Did he really need to do this?* He breathed in the scent of fall; a crisp, cold, earthy fragrance. He allowed himself to briefly admire the vivid colors of the leaves: red, yellow, orange, and brown. Then, he made up his mind. He was going to her office once again.

Her office was a haze of white. It reverberated off the walls and blinded Michael's eyes. There were white walls, white desks, and white chairs. He walked up to her desk.

"Hello, Michael," she said. She plastered a fake smile on her face and handed him two bottles. "Take these and lay down on the examination table for thirty minutes. Your check will be waiting for you when you are finished."

Michael followed her instructions very carefully. He unscrewed the top of both bottles. He drank the liquid from the first bottle. He spilled the contents of the second bottle into his hand, tilted back his head, placed them in his mouth, and swallowed. Then he stretched out on the examination table. He tapped his watch to set the timer for thirty minutes.

And then, everything went black.

*Beep...Beep....Beep....*When his senses returned, he realized that his watch had been continuously beeping its steady signal that the thirty minutes had passed. *Had he fallen asleep?* He tapped his watch to end the vexatious alarm. Then he saw the time. He had been asleep for two hours.

Although this was strange, it was not unusual. Every once in a while, Michael would fall asleep for longer than the given time.

He walked out of the examination room. The woman reclined pleasantly at her desk.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean to keep you. I must’ve fallen asleep.”

“That’s alright,” she replied, with that same facade of pleasance on her face. “Here is your check. I expect you back next week.”

He stopped by the bank on the way home to cash his check. *Wow. Only six more of these checks and he would be done. Done with secrecy. Done with lies.*

He arrived home shortly after, carrying a small bag. Ashley had cooked him pork and rice with steamed broccoli.

“You’re late,” she scolded.

“At the gym,” he mumbled, holding up the small gym bag.

“You’re not sweaty?” she asked.

“Car air conditioning,” he replied.

“Where are your gym clothes?” she inquired.

“Changed before I drove home,” he answered.

Reluctantly, she accepted his excuses and they sat down at the table.

She’s starting to get suspicious, Michael thought. I need to be more careful.

As dinner commenced, Michael reached for his fork, but accidentally knocked it on the floor.

When he bent over to pick it up, he saw something on the bottom of his right pant leg. A little splotch of crimson red. *Barbecue sauce?* He wondered, but he hadn’t used barbecue sauce all day. He wiped his finger across the dot of red. Part of the splotch could be seen on his fingertip.

As Michael peered closer at it, he came to the conclusion that the residue on his pant leg was unmistakably blood.

He pulled up his pants, but there was nothing. Not a scratch, not a bruise. Nothing. *Where could the blood have come from?*

“Did you find the fork?” Ashley asked.

Her voice snapped him back to reality.

“Um....yes, here it is,” he replied and quickly sat back up.

He heard the shrill scream of a woman. He heard another lady's voice. A voice of pleasance, but nearly fake. She laughed at the woman who was screaming. Then everything fell silent.

A knife. All he could see was a shining knife. Dripping with blood. Blood. Blood. The same crimson blood that was on his pant leg.

Michael awoke, drenched in sweat. It was 2:04am. He had gone to bed early, extremely exhausted from the day's activities. He had woken up, having experienced another nightmare. He rolled over and closed his eyes, but sleep eluded him. He tossed and turned the rest of the night, slipping in and out of a slumber filled with ghastly white, deep black, and crimson red dreams.

The following night, before Michael fell asleep, he contemplated all of the things that had been happening to him the past few months. Several months ago, Michael had painted himself into a corner. Ever since he turned twenty, Michael had developed a gambling problem. He had tried to keep it under control, but then he lost thousands of dollars on a single sports bet. He had to drain their savings account to pay it off. It took cunning on his part to keep Ashley from peeking into the account, for one look and she would know that Michael had lost over half of their savings.

For weeks, Michael thought of any possible way he could recover the money. He needed something that would earn him pay fast, for very little effort or time. Finally, an advertisement appeared on the corner of his computer for

pharmaceutical drug testing. Each week, a sizeable check awaited him for the simple task of taking some medications and reporting back on the side effects. He knew this job placed his very health at risk, but he had found no other option.

It had been two months since Michael first started his job as a lab rat. Once a week, he would go to the office, swallow the pharmaceuticals, and sit down on the examination table for a certain amount of time until he received his check. Once a week, he would lie to his wife, for Michael feared that Ashley would divorce him if she ever found out the truth.

For the rest of the week, Michael continued to have weird dreams. They made him sick to his stomach, and he always awoke with a sense of panic and confusion. At first, he had dismissed the dreams to his crazy imagination. Then he began wondering if there was more of a meaning to them. Most of the dreams had a woman in them; a woman who screamed. A few had colors of crimson red, deep black, and ghastly white. Another dream had another lady's voice. A voice that sounded oddly familiar.... And the blood on his pant leg, what was that all about?

Slowly, Michael began to connect the dots. It all lead back to the other lady's voice. The one that sounded familiar....the one that, to Michael, sounded exactly like the voice of the woman in the drug-testing office. Ghastly white perfectly matched her office, which seemed devoid of color. Deep black, well, he didn't know what that meant. But the woman who screamed, and the blood, must somehow connect.

White is the color of cleanliness. But something bothered him about the woman's white office building. It was almost *too* white. It was almost *too* clean. Like they were hiding something.

Michael then wondered why he falls asleep at the drug-testing office. How peculiar to just *fall asleep* without even trying to, or without even being tired.

Yes, something was most definitely amiss with the white office, and Michael vowed to himself to figure it out.

The first step in Michael's grand plan of discovering the drug-testing office's secrets was research. For the next few weeks, Michael would research the place on the internet. He hoped to find faults in the website, advertisements,

or reviews, but there were none. Just like the white office, the internet was as clean as a whistle. So far, step one was a fail.

Step two in Michael's plan was to scope out the office. This proved a little more successful. Every week, he would closely observe his surroundings, searching for hidden clues. He wrote down all his noticings in a small notebook:

1. People. There are very few workers at the office. There's the receptionist (a woman named Molly), one doctor (a man named Randy), one scientist (a woman named Christie), and one custodian (a man named Gus). Shouldn't there be pharmacists, biologists, statisticians, nurses, biomedical engineers, etc.? And where are all of the other patients? I've never seen anybody else go through these drug tests.
2. Building proportions are off. It was never a huge building to begin with, but I've sized it up and it seems that there is a large space in between the walls and the rooms I'm familiar with. Hidden rooms?

Michael constantly debated with himself on whether these noticings were real, or whether they were just figures of his imagination. Step two had proved mildly successful, but did not tell him exactly what was going on. Michael decided that it was time for step three.

The day before Michael's next visit to the drug-testing office, his package came in. He opened the box in the secrecy of the closet, and then he saw it—his spying device. A microscopic camera lay before him, disguised as a button. You could remotely connect the device to your iPhone and record the footage captured from the camera. He retrieved the sewing kit and got to work.

Michael's plan was to use the camera to record what went on during the two hours he was asleep on the examination table. He didn't know for sure whether he would really fall asleep this time, but he was fairly confident about it, and sure enough he woke up two hours later and went home.

He didn't dare watch the video until he assured himself that Ashley lay sound asleep beside him. He carefully pulled his iPhone out, put on his earbuds, and pressed play.

He saw the white walls first. After a few minutes, Molly walked into the examination room with Randy trailing behind her.

“Are you sure they won’t catch us?” she asked the man.

“No, of course not, Molly. How could they trace them back to us? It’s him who’s committing the crimes, not us,” Randy replied.

“But couldn’t they test his bloodstream for the drugs?” she inquired nervously.

“Don’t worry, Molly. He is unaware that the liquid you give him to take with his pills is a dissolver. The evidence disappears right from his bloodstream. Now, is he asleep?”

“Yes, sir,” Molly replied.

“Let’s get going, then.”

On the video, Michael saw Molly tap his forehead three times. Then he saw himself arise from the table.

The man handed him a white envelope. He saw himself take the envelope, pull out a slip of paper. The paper had a picture and an address on it. The picture showed a middle-aged woman.

Michael saw himself walk out of the office building and into his car. He watched as he started the car and drove to the indicated house.

Once he had arrived, he walked around the car to the trunk and opened it up. Inside rested a deep black 9mm pistol. Michael saw himself pick it up, conceal it under his shirt, and approach the front door.

He knocked three times. A middle-aged woman who matched the picture from the envelope opened the door. Michael saw himself step inside.

“I’m sorry,” he said on the video.

Then he pointed the gun in between her eyes. He heard her scream just as the gun fired. The same ear-splitting scream as the one Michael had heard in his dreams.

Michael watched in shock and horror as he wrapped her body in a blanket, threw her in the trunk of his car, and drove back to the white office building.

He watched himself as he took the woman back into the drug-testing lab, opened a hidden white door, placed her body inside the small closet, closed the door, and walked back into the white room to return to his original position on the examination table.

Michael stopped the video. It all made sense now. The crimson red, deep black, and ghastly white. The dreams. The drug-testing office. Molly's fake pleasant disposition. The strange building proportions. The amount of people at the office.

It took a team of four to pull off the crime of the century. And Michael was smack-dab in the middle of it. He had committed murder. Not by free will, but murder nonetheless.

Questions swarmed Michael's head as he lay there in shock and terror. How many murders had they forced him to commit? How could he prove to everyone that he was innocent? How could he live with the guilt of taking another human being's life?

Michael realized that every time he fell asleep for two hours on the examination table was a day that he committed murder.

Michael thought of his options. He could refuse to drink the dissolver, but the evil foursome at the office would know and get suspicious. He could show the police the video, but it never once showed his face, so no proof there.

What could he do?

At that moment he wished that he had trusted. Lying can get you into hole of misery that you can no longer escape. He should never have lied to Ashley about the bet, the drug-testing office, or the dreams. If he could just trust Ashley with all of this, she could help him think of a solution.

She always was a good problem-solver, Michael thought. That's it. I'm going to tell her.

"Ashley?" he whispered softly.

Then louder, "Ashley??"

She rolled over.

"We need to talk. Right now," he said sternly.

At the urgency in his voice, she sat up quickly.

"What is it?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

And Michael told her. He told her everything, from the very beginning. From how he lost all that money from gambling to how he had just watched a video of himself murdering an innocent woman. Ashley sat there, listening, her mouth open at times, but she didn't once speak a word until he had spilled the entire story.

Once he finished speaking, she leaned over and gave him a tight hug.

“I’m so glad you told me,” she said.

“You aren’t angry with me?” Michael asked.

“Oh, you’re in trouble,” she said, “but first let’s get you out of this mess.”

They talked for hours until they finally came up with a perfect plan.

The next week, Michael again activated his button camera and returned to the drug-testing office for his typical visit. He went through the usual pill-swallow routine. His body once again became enclosed in darkness.

But this time, Ashley had come to the office too. She had snuck around and entered through the back door. In her hand, she held a white envelope. When Molly left her seat to use the restroom, Ashley quickly replaced the white envelope on Molly’s desk with the one she had in her hand. Then Ashley stepped into the examination room. She snuck the gun into Michael’s jacket pocket and slipped out without anyone noticing. She returned home and waited anxiously for Michael to arrive.

As soon as Michael walked through the front door, she ran to him and hugged him tightly. Then he pulled out his iPhone for them to watch the camera footage. The camera showed the white ceiling, but then panned to the door as he arose from the examination table.

Molly and Randy were directly in front of him. Randy handed him a white envelope. Michael opened it, and pulled out a white slip of paper. On the paper were pictures of Molly, Randy, Gus, and Christie, but instead of an address, the paper read “right here.” Molly and Randy’s expressions turned to horror.

“I’m sorry,” Michael said on the video.

